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Memphis Jury Finds Conspiracy Led to King Assassination

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MEMPHIS, Dec. 8—After deliberating for barely three hours, a jury today decided that slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was the victim of an assassination conspiracy and did not die at the hands of a lone gunman.

The verdict in Shelby County Circuit Court came in a wrongful-death lawsuit the King family filed last year against former Memphis cafe owner Loyd Jowers, who claimed in 1993 that he conspired with others to kill King at the Lorraine Motel here April 4, 1968.

The jury of six whites and six blacks awarded damages of $100. The family had sought a minimal sum because, they said, their motive was to search for the truth about the slaying, not to make money.

Juror David Morphy said the panel believed the assassination was too complex for James Earl Ray to have planned and carried out alone. "We all thought," he said, "it was a kind of cut-and-dried case, with the evidence . . . brought forth that there were a lot of people involved."

Although Ray pleaded guilty to the murder in March 1969 and received a 99-year sentence, he recanted three days later and died in prison last year insisting he had been framed. In 1997, in a move that surprised many, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and his four grown children allied with Ray and his lawyer, William F. Pepper, in backing the conspiracy theory.

"I'm just so glad the people have spoken," said King's younger son, Dexter, after the verdict. "This is what we have always wanted. . . . This is history."

The trial attracted surprisingly little national attention, even though the family had described the nearly month-long proceeding as "the first and only" trial into King's death. They said they hoped the information gleaned would force a new investigation into the slaying. A congressional committee working in 1977-78 concluded that while Ray shot King, two of Ray's brothers might also have been involved, hoping to collect a bounty on King's life offered by white supremacists in St. Louis.

Pepper, an American based in London, has spent much of the past 20 years investigating the circumstances of King's death, and claimed in a 1995 book, "Orders to Kill," that a vast conspiracy involving the Mafia, the FBI, the CIA and the military was responsible for the slaying.

Representing the King family here, he offered more than 70 witnesses during the trial, including former United Nations ambassador and Atlanta mayor Andrew Young. In closing arguments this morning, he said that King's growing opposition to the Vietnam War had sealed his fate.

After the verdict, Pepper said, "Today, a jury of 12 men and women ruled that there was a conspiracy that involved Loyd Jowers, a local man, as well as other unknown conspirators associated with the Memphis police department, the state of Tennessee and the federal government."

Jowers, 73, who was absent for much of the trial because of illness, told his story to a network television news crew in 1993, saying he was paid $100,000 to help hire a gunman who was not Ray. In 1968, Jowers owned Jim's Grill, a cafe near the Lorraine Motel. On the day of the slaying, Ray, a petty criminal and escaped convict, rented a room above the restaurant.

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